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CONGRESS SET TO TURN SPOTLIGHT ON U.S. ESPIONAGE NETWORK

By Jim Wolf

WASHINGTON, Sept 8, Reuter - The U.S. Congress is turning its spotlight on the shadowy world of espionage as debate mounts on redefining the mission and shape of the Central Intelligence Agency after radical changes in the Soviet Union.

With the Kremlin no longer an ideological foe and with a budget crunch continuing, pressure is growing to streamline the intelligence community, redefine its mission and step up its accountability.

The controversy has been simmering since the Soviet empire began collapsing in 1989 and Moscow lost its grip on Eastern Europe.

As the debate shapes up, the sprawling multi-agency intelligence network is in the hands of a caretaker, and President George Bush's choice to head the CIA, Robert Gates, faces tough questioning over the Iran-Contra affair.

Nomination hearings for Gates, a former CIA deputy director who is now deputy national security adviser, begin on September 16 before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

That panel is already studying ways to overhaul the intelligence community, which operates on a secret budget of about 30 billion dollars a year.

The committee will hold a hearing on Wednesday on a bill that would triple the number of top CIA posts -- to nine -- that are subject to Senate confirmation.

"The confirmation process for top intelligence officials will serve to strengthen the accountability of the CIA," panel member John Glenn, author of the bill, said last Friday.

"Because the agency is such a vast and secretive organization, it is essential that it be fully accountable for its actions."

Currently, the president nominates and the Senate confirms only the director of central intelligence, the deputy director and the CIA inspector general.

Glenn, an Ohio Democrat, would extend the Senate's sway to the CIA's general counsel and the five deputy directors in charge of covert operations, intelligence analysis, science and technology, administration, and planning and coordination.

Richard Kerr, who became acting CIA director last Monday, will oppose the measure when he appears before the panel, an official said.

One concern is said to be the potential politicisation of

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the CIA, which has about 20,000 employees and accounts for 15 per cent of the total intelligence budget. The CIA officially declined comment on Glenn's bill.

Kerr said on Saturday the instability and uncertainty unleashed by the disintegration of the old Soviet Union, far from letting the United States drop its guard, boosts the need for intelligence gathering and analysis.

The challenges ahead of us...are much greater in many ways than the challenges that were facing us when we had a single, rather straightforward enemy to look at," he told veterans of the Office of Strategic Services, forerunner of the CIA.

Kerr took over after the retirement of William Webster, who has been credited with restoring the CIA's image after it was damaged by the Iran-Contra affair.

The scandal involved evading a congressional ban on aid to Nicaragua's rebels by skimming proceeds from secret arms sales to Iran.

The most radical proposal for rejigging U.S. intelligence was put forward by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a New York Democrat who was vice chairman of the intelligence panel from 1981 to 1986.

Moynihan has suggested disbanding the CIA and putting the State Department in charge of intelligence-gathering operations.

A former chief of CIA counter-terrorism operations, Vincent Cannistraro, wrote in the Washington Post last week that the CIA's paramilitary capabilities should have been transferred to the Pentagon several years ago.

William Odom, who headed the National Security Agency from 1985 to 1988, said he did not consider Moynihan's and Cannistraro's proposals "as absurd today as I would have a year ago," given the vast geopolitical change.

"We are overdue for basic structural readjustments to take account of the changes -- new technology, new missions, new realities," he said in a telephone interview.

Less sweeping proposals for reform are expected from intelligence panel chairman David Boren, an Oklahoma Democrat who wants to shrink the bureaucracy by forging closer ties between the CIA and sister military agencies.